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Governor gets bill that requires eateries to post nutritional data

■ DeSaulnier says measure would help in fight against obesity

By Steven Harmon
 MEDIANEWS SACRAMENTO BUREAU

SACRAMENTO — With obesity and its related diseases on the rise, a Bay Area lawmaker and health advocates appealed to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's zeal for health and fitness by urging him Wednesday to sign a bill requiring restaurant chains to come clean about calories.

The bill, SB120, would require

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chain restaurants with 15 or more locations to post calories beside each regular item on their menu boards. It also would require those restaurants to post calories, saturated fat and trans fat grams, carbohydrates and levels of sodium on their regular

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hand-out menus.

"Health and fitness are priorities for this governor," said the bill's principal co-author, Assemblyman Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord, who has owned two Bay Area restaurants. "Just as he led the nation in getting sodas and junk foods out of schools, Gov. Schwarzenegger once again has the opportunity to lead by ensuring Californians have the information they need to make healthy dining decisions when they eat out."

The governor must sign or veto the bill by Oct. 14. It faces heavy opposition from the California Restaurant Association, which is calling on its members to pressure Schwarzenegger to veto the bill.

"While it applies only to chain restaurants," a message on the association's Web site said, "it is only a matter of time until the concept will be expanded to all restaurants in California."

Jot Condie, the president and CEO of the association, has labeled the legislation a "feel-good Band-Aid" that ignores the true issues behind obesity while punishing restaurants. Genetic disposition, eating habits and socioeconomic status are among factors that lead to obesity.

Obesity rates, he said, have risen dramatically since 1990 despite labeling requirements on store-bought food.

But families are eating out more, health advocates said, and that should compel restaurants to assume more responsibility in informing customers about the food they serve.

"More people do pay attention and have made changes in what they eat," said Diane Sobkowicz, a Sacramento cardiologist. "The problem is they eat out more.

Putting calorie counts (on menus) can have a significant impact. People need to know what they're eating."

A Field Poll earlier this year showed that 84 percent of registered voters favor requiring nutritional menu labeling. And a federal judge recently boosted the proponents' legal case by ruling that cities and states are free to require such labeling.

"This is more than an embarrassing bulge around the waist," said Glenna Trochet, Sacramento County's health officer and president of the California Conference of Local Health Officers. "It's a crisis. Nutritional menu labeling is an important obesity prevention strategy."

DeSaulnier, who spent 32 years running TR's in Concord and Santa Fe Restaurant in Berkeley, said that the restaurant industry has spent millions of dollars on advertising campaigns to attract customers. The least it could do, he said, is to put up new menu boards, at a cost of \$2,000 apiece, with calorie counts.

"Some of us are old enough to remember McDonald's Big Mac campaign," he said. "Two all-beef patties with special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions and a sesame seed bun. We know the marketing the food industry goes about to begin these campaigns. That's a lot of information. All we're asking is 300 (calories). I don't think that's an imposition. It's a good investment."

Nearly 60 percent of adults are overweight, Trochet said, contributing to more than 300,000 deaths a year, and costing the state \$28 billion a year in health care costs and lost productivity.

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